



Chief Revenue Officer 2026 Trends: Hiring the Future of Growth

An analysis of growth leadership across 2,439 companies, covering adoption, career paths, tenure, and where the role is heading.

Executive summary

What is the future of growth?

What do businesses need to understand about how revenue leaders, including CROs, CGOs, CCOs, CBDOs, and CSOs, are shaping growth today? What kind of revenue leader do companies need as AI changes the logic of growth, and how should current and aspiring leaders prepare for the next era of revenue leadership?

To answer these questions, N2Growth conducted a global study from December 2025 to September 2026. The research draws on more than 28,000 data points, gathered from 10-Ks, DEF 14As, corporate disclosures, public professional profiles, and a proprietary database, and informed by background interviews with revenue leaders. It covers public and private companies, from mid-caps to 2,000 of the world's largest companies.

In this report you'll find

Why the CRO is growing in importance across industries

Who companies are hiring and which types of companies are adding the role

Four CRO archetypes for four business moments

A framework for the next era of revenue leadership

The CRO: one role, many titles

The role discussed in this paper goes by many titles, including Chief Revenue Officer, Chief Growth Officer, Chief Commercial Officer, Chief Client Officer, Chief Business Development Officer, and Chief Sales Officer. We use "CRO" as a catch-all term for these chief revenue, growth, and business development titles, since they share overlapping remits (see our discussion below on [different types of CROs](#) for more on the various contours of the role).

This report is for

Boards and CEOs

who want to understand the present and future of revenue leadership and, when the time comes, how to hire the right CRO for their organization.

Current CROs

who want to understand how the role is changing in 2026 and beyond, and what that means for the revenue engines they are running now.

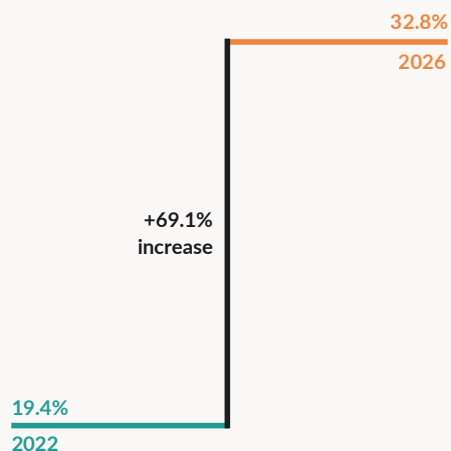
and aspiring CROs

who want to understand where the role is headed, what companies increasingly value in CRO candidates, and how to prepare for the next era of revenue leadership.

Who's being hired for the future of growth?

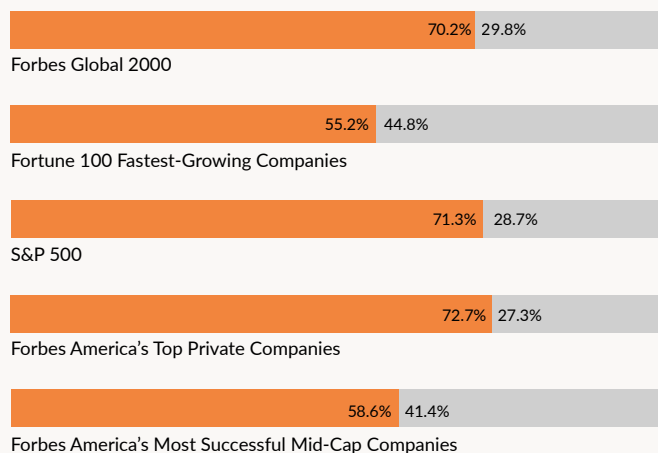
More companies have a CRO*

S&P 500

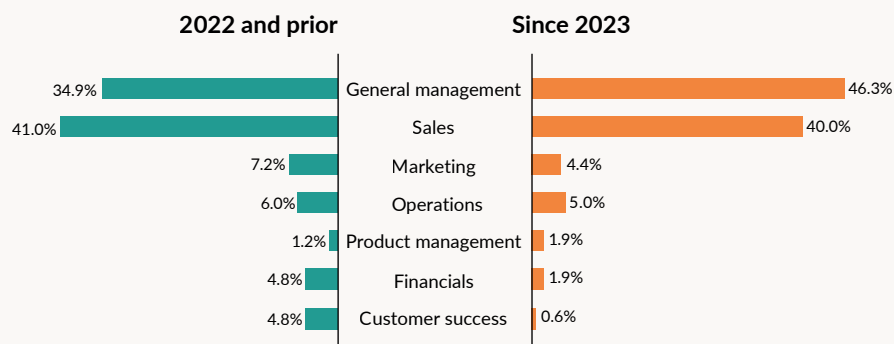


Companies favor internal candidates

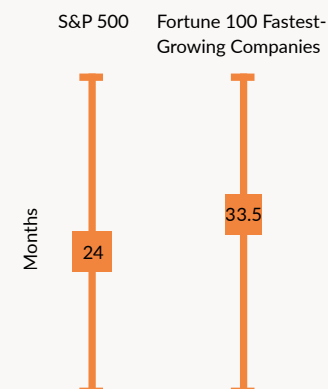
Internal External



Nearly half of CROs now come directly from general management backgrounds



Fastest-growing firms keep CROs the longest



What do boards, CEOs, and CROs need?

Boards and CEOs need CROs who can translate the company's vision for growth into coordinated execution across functions, while advising on how shifts in technology, buyer behavior, and operating models will affect enterprise value.

Other C-suite leaders need CROs who can align the revenue engine without reducing it to one function's priorities. The strongest CROs increasingly think like systems leaders, connecting technology, commercial execution, buyer behavior, and organizational design into one coherent revenue generation model.

CROs need business acumen, systems-level judgment, and the ability to lead through uncertainty. The role is no longer, if it ever was, the top sales job. It is an enterprise leadership role that requires cross-functional management, buyer intelligence, and the capacity to continuously calibrate the revenue engine.

**2022 figures hold index membership constant and exclude companies that have since dropped the role.*

Three actions for boards and CEOs

1. Prioritize enterprise range over functional pedigree.
2. Keep the CRO close to the board and CEO.
3. Hire for what you need in 2026 and beyond.

Three actions for current CROs

1. Redesign the engine through AI.
2. Treat go-to-market as a system.
3. Stay closest to the buyer.

Three actions for aspiring CROs

1. Build cross-functional and general management range deliberately.
2. Seek experiences that build change leadership, not just linear advancement.
3. Build the role before you hold it.

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The CRO and the new revenue engine

Catching up with the first wave of change: to 2023 and beyond

In 2023, the CRO role made headlines.¹ LinkedIn ranked it the fastest-growing role.² McKinsey declared that Fortune 100 companies with a CRO outgrew their peers by 1.8x.³ Boards, CEOs, founders, investors—everyone, it seems—believed the role keyed growth, and thousands of CRO positions were created across the globe.

The modern iteration of the CRO first appeared more than twenty-five years ago in tech. Its *raison d'être* is to coordinate revenue-facing functions, such as marketing, sales, product,⁴ and customer success, thereby creating operational efficiency and unity around one overarching goal: revenue growth.

Before the introduction of this new C-suite officer, **marketing**, focused on the relatively ethereal goals of boosting the long-term value of the company brand, almost by necessity had nearly the opposite mentality of sales.⁵ **Sales**, for its part, was, and often remains, structured by short-term targets that, in opposition to marketing, were definitionally concrete: cash in. Product development and customer success were ostensibly entirely separate from the sales process. They were, after all, what happened either before or after the sale. Both, obviously, had clear connections to marketing's goal (long-term brand value) and even sales (if one wants return customers and word-of-mouth sales), but their domains were (and often remain) so operationally distant from each other, as well as from sales and marketing, that separating the functions seemed not just sensible but necessary.

Separate geographic and business units, each of which often operated with separate teams, reinforced or even doubled the above-mentioned divisions between customer-facing functions.

For companies with a CRO, the differences between and among geographies, business units, and the customer-facing

¹ E.g., Stephen Diorio, "Inside The Mind Of The Chief Revenue Officer," *Forbes*, March 1, 2023. We use "CRO" throughout the paper to refer to CROs and equivalent titles. Unless otherwise specified, all analysis includes equivalent titles as well.

² "LinkedIn Jobs on the Rise 2023: 25 U.S. Roles that are Growing in Demand," *LinkedIn News*, January 18, 2023; LinkedIn labeled the top role the "Head of Revenue Operations," noting that the role can "also be known as Chief Revenue Officer or Head of Revenue Management." Our study counted C-suite level officers only.

³ "A Bigger, Bolder Vision: How CROs are Propelling Growth from the C-Suite," *McKinsey*, July 21, 2023. At the time of McKinsey's study, only 11 of the Fortune 100 had CROs, suggesting insufficient sample size for McKinsey's analysis and subsequent claims about the link between the presence of a CRO and outsized growth.

⁴ The CRO's role in coordinating with product varies significantly by industry, stage, and company; see our discussion of CRO types below for more.

⁵ This is primarily a description of marketing before the analytics revolution. As discussed below, digitally enabled analytics were one of the developments that led companies to adopt a CRO structure.

functions aren't erased. Business unit and division heads of marketing, sales, product, and customer success still usually exist. But they now report to, or at least coordinate through, a single revenue leader who builds shared KPIs and coordinated OKRs, formalizes cross-communication, and sets up centers of excellence across marketing, sales, product, and customer success. The CRO thereby converts what had been siloed, or even competing, functions into a single overarching workstream that fulfills the board's and CEO's vision for the enterprise's growth as a whole.

The new model of *revenue* leadership was a true innovation. Unite the customer-facing functions. Bring strategic unity across business units and disparate geographies. Tie marketing to hard data, just like sales, while maintaining its long-term vision and goals. Put sales in conversation with the long-term aims of marketing, while adding the imperative of customer satisfaction to the mix (now a joint effort between product and customer success), which cross-pollinates its success back to marketing and sales. Marketing, sales, product, and customer success don't need to be walled off from one another, but can work together as one integrated system, resulting in deeper, stronger growth.

What's changed? Why more companies are turning to a CRO

The new CRO wasn't merely a C-suite naming trend. Nor was it simply an idea whose time had come. No, it was the organizational aftereffect of a change in the substratum of the technology the business ran on. In this section we explain how the modern CRO was the consequence of the technological shift from analog to digital systems—all of which will set up our discussion of how AI will further redefine revenue leadership.

In analog systems, physical constraints governed the spatial and temporal logic of marketing, sales, product, and customer success. In these analog systems, the customer, client, or patient was usually physically and temporally distant from the business, as were the different parts of the business, whether a geographic unit, business unit, or function. The rise of digital systems, powered by the internet and especially cloud computing, collapsed those distances. The customer could be "close," often and always, so too the various business units and functional groups. And, if the operating logic of the customer-facing functions changed, so should the accompanying organizational logic.⁶

For example, in analog systems, sales was not only separate from marketing, product, and customer success. Companies also usually

"CEOs want a CRO because they want one person accountable for the top line. Regional and business unit leaders own their P&Ls, but no one else owns consolidated revenue. The CRO does, which frees the CEO to set direction and lead the enterprise as a whole."

Tony Morales
Chairman, N2Growth



⁶ Our argument parallels Alfred Chandler's now classic thesis that the modern managerial organization was an effect of the railroad and the telegraph. Chandler proposed that these technologies transformed human relationships with time and distance. The rise of large corporations organized by layers of managers was the effect. Similarly, we're proposing that first the internet and now AI are causing, as aftereffects, as it were, changes to the organizational structures of businesses. See Alfred Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977.

“Appointing a CRO is more than an org-chart question. It’s a talent question. The successful CRO will be someone with the operational capability to invent and run an AI-driven revenue engine, and the cross-functional experience to coordinate and gain buy-in across teams that are often siloed or even in competition. Boards therefore need both clarity in defining the role and attention to finding the right person to match it.”

Frank Congiu
EVP, Human Capital
Strategy and Executive
Partnerships, Randstad
Enterprise



organized it by geography. The intertwined factors of geographic space and local preference, combined with concomitant temporal limits, meant that geographic division was (usually) the best, if not the only, way to manage sales. Sales representatives were local or regional because they had to gain knowledge of their customers through spending time with them in particular places, including over meals, games of golf, or just on the floor. This was the analog world.

The fact pattern varied by industry, sector, and company. Sales of legal services were different from sales of consumer goods, of course, but analog logic always defined the game. Limited knowledge, local/specialized expertise, spatial constraints, and porous, “intuitive,” data created the modern sales management structure and its separation from marketing and customer success, which were simply too informationally distinct to be managed efficiently from a single point of view.

Although the respective goals of marketing and sales obviously intertwined and overlapped, the two functions often operated as near mirror opposites. Sales, broadly speaking, worked from the bottom up, while marketing operated from the top down, relying almost exclusively on one-way forms of mass market communication such as billboards, newspapers, radio, and television advertising. Its performance metrics, unlike sales’ inherently quantified monthly and quarterly goals, often came down to executive vibes—think Don Draper and his marketing pitches.

Similarly, product, often a tangible item, was developed before, and physically apart from, its sale and use. Product leaders essentially had to just guess what customers wanted, for the time lag between development and release was often measured in years. Customer success, for its part, came after the sale, with customers almost always using the purchased thing in a physically separate location from where they bought it. Consequently, customer success, when it existed at all, was often no more than a return policy, warranty, or a promise to make things right.

In short, the product was almost always physically and temporally separated from the provider, despite wide variation across industries and sectors. These physical and temporal distances made it essentially impossible to coordinate across these functions. There was simply too much physical and temporal distance between, and often even within, the functions, their metrics, and the product (development and service)—not to mention the distance between the organization and the customer—to orchestrate coherent operational unity. The separation between these functions wasn’t strategic. It was analog.

This all began to change with the introduction of the internet, cloud computing, and the availability of digital data. With cloud computing, CRMs transformed sales teams’ visibility into current and potential customers.⁷ Suddenly, it became possible to manage a simultaneously

⁷ Ron Miller, “How Salesforce Paved the Way for the SaaS Platform Approach,” *TechCrunch*, March 22, 2019.

aligned, yet nuanced, set of sales metrics and gauges across regions and sales types. So too, whether through Facebook, Google Ads, or other tools (depending on industry/sector), digital tools enabled **marketing** to shift from broadsides to campaigns that could target customers with granular precision, a precision that began to blur its traditional boundary with sales. And finally, a point to which we'll return more fully below, the digital, by breaking temporal and spatial constraints, fundamentally altered the relationship with the customer pre- and post-sales. Without those analog barriers, **product** teams not only understood, as never before, how customers were using their products, what they wanted, and how they wanted the product to be improved (all of which was best learned in conversation with **customer success**). They could also, at least in software, change and update a live product in response.

In sum, digital infrastructures didn't merely offer the chance to speed current practices or develop new offerings. They reconstituted the kind of physical and temporal relationships businesses could have with clients and customers.

Tech, especially nascent SaaS companies, understood the organizational implications first. If there was no longer a sharp temporal or physical divide between "the sale" and the consumption of the product, why should the organization separate sales from customer success? If marketing could interact not only with potential customers with pinpoint precision and timing, but also with current customers who are actively receiving system updates, why should the organization silo marketing off from sales or customer success? And if product teams could see and respond to customer use in near real-time, if updates could regularly be sent out, why should product remain organizationally distinct from other customer-facing functions?

The answer was that these divisions no longer applied, or at least not in the same way, in a digital/cloud economy. Indeed, the very digital systems that allowed new kinds of relationships with clients and customers also enabled new types of intra-organization data collection, sharing, and cross-communication. Suddenly the modern CRO was possible. Someone could unite the board's and CEO's overarching growth strategy into a coherent, shared, and synced plan, where revenue growth was the unifying goal, not distinct, competing, and mutually unintelligible marketing goals, sales goals, and customer success goals.

While software companies grasped and applied these insights first, leading companies outside software eventually understood that the collapsing distance between marketing, sales, product, and customer success wasn't limited to software and tech products. Digital systems now mediated nearly every client and consumer experience, even of the most resolutely material goods.

Consider Harry's, which sells subscriptions for that decidedly material consumer product, the razor blade. Or Starbucks, whose app mediates its relationship with many of its customers. While not technically a subscription service, Starbucks uses its app almost like a subscription, to deepen customer attachment and generate the kind of data that blurs older distinctions between marketing, sales, product, and customer success.

Similar dynamics are reshaping client, patient, and customer relationships across professional services, healthcare, manufacturing, and utilities. The XaaS model may not seem to apply in these sectors, but cloud-enabled digital technologies are nevertheless transforming client, patient, and customer relationships at either the front or back end. Professional service firms now offer 24-hour support through global, cloud-enabled workforces; hospitals rely on patient portals and telehealth, while patients increasingly do their own research and reach out to doctors with their own plans; manufacturers use connected products and service dashboards to track performance after the sale; and utility customers monitor and adjust power usage through digital apps.

It often takes a long time for the effects of new technology to fully permeate the business environment, and we believe this to be the case here. Many companies have adapted marketing, sales, product, and customer success practices, but have not yet aligned organizationally. The number of CROs is growing, but two-thirds of companies in the S&P 500 and five in six companies in the Forbes Global 2000 still don't have a CRO.⁸

While companies can, and do, succeed while still operating under vestigial analog organizational structures, it should come as no surprise that more of them are adopting the CRO model to modernize their organizations and boost their growth.

⁸ N2Growth analysis; see the CRO adoption data discussed below.

The CRO of 2026 and beyond

The CRO role emerged out of the change from analog to digital technological infrastructures. We predict that the role will be recreated as the digital/cloud-era CRO gives way to the AI CRO of 2026 and beyond.

AI is already starting to reshape go-to-market from end to end. In **marketing**, for example, AI is changing who writes and runs campaigns, the speed at which they can be created, tested, and run, and the data on which those campaigns are built and by which success is measured.

As for **sales**, AI tools are coaching salespeople, absorbing time-consuming research and preparation, and serving as embedded product or success experts for either the seller or the customer. In addition to improving and speeding current processes, AI sales agents are already scaling operations at some companies in a way that is transforming the nature of their go-to-market. As one CEO put it, “If you had unlimited money, you’d hire a million sales reps and put one on each company. Now with agents, you can.”⁹

Product and **customer success** are also undergoing AI revolutions, with AI allowing near-instant synthetic buyer feedback and UX studies, transforming product development in the process. Customer success, meanwhile, is one of the first places AI agents are being deployed (on both sides of the sales relationship).¹⁰

More profoundly, AI, by significantly reducing coding costs, is ending the era of standardized enterprise software. This means that, as Deep Nishar and Nitin Nohria put it, “software can be shaped around the way a company actually works, rather than the other way around.”¹¹ The consequences are potentially enormous. The shared platforms that made the original CRO model possible, the CRM systems that gave revenue leaders common data and legible metrics across previously siloed functions, were also, by their nature, standardizing. Every company using them had to run roughly the same commercial architecture. AI ends that. Companies will now be able to customize the software powering their revenue engine, enabling a degree of commercial differentiation across revenue-facing functions that standardized platforms made difficult or impossible.

⁹ Sofia Chierchio, “Meet The \$250 Million Startup Challenging Salesforce With AI Agents,” *Forbes*, April 28, 2026.

¹⁰ See, for example, Ali Furman, Ege Gürdeniz, Rima Safari, and Remzi Ural, “How Brands Can Adapt When AI Agents Do the Shopping,” *Harvard Business Review*, February 19, 2026; Belle Lin, “Can AI Replace Humans for Market Research?” *Wall Street Journal*, March 6, 2026; Jeremy Korst, Stefano Puntoni, and Olivier Toubia, “How AI Helps Scale Qualitative Customer Research,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 6, 2026.

¹¹ Deep Nishar and Nitin Nohria, “The End of One-Size-Fits-All Enterprise Software,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 23, 2026.

This reworking of the revenue engine's technological infrastructure will put new pressure on CROs, and of a different kind. Beyond coordinating functions that are relatively operationally standardized due to shared software tools and platforms, they will now be asked to ensure that bespoke solutions across marketing, sales, product, and customer success fit together as a coherent system, even as the revenue engine's parts are customized in ways that were previously impossible. More than that, CEOs will increasingly look to the CRO not just to streamline differing functions, but to develop a differentiated revenue model that takes advantage of the company's unique capabilities and value proposition, translating the CEO's vision for growth into a revenue engine that no competitor can simply replicate.

In short, efficiency gains are only part of the story. AI, like the cloud before it, is rewiring each of these functions so fundamentally that the leadership of revenue is already beginning to be reinvented. The cloud-era CRO peaked in 2023. Now is the time for the CRO of 2026 and beyond.

(See ["What is the future of growth?"](#) below for more on the future of revenue leadership.)

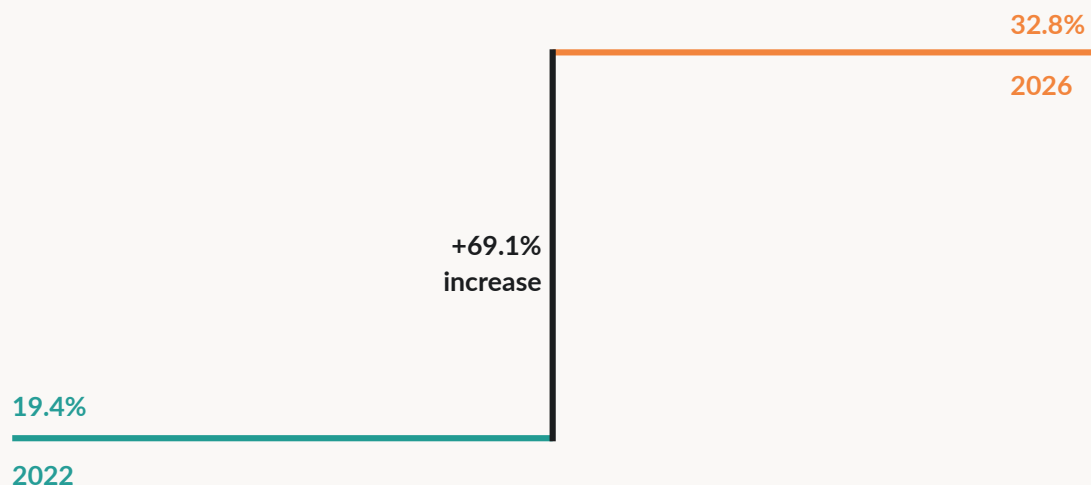
The evolving profile of revenue leadership

Who has a CRO?

Organizations are increasingly turning to CROs to drive growth. Today, 32.8% of S&P 500 companies have a CRO. Four in ten of those companies (67 of 164) did not have a CRO in 2022.

32.8% of S&P 500 companies now have a CRO, up significantly from 2022

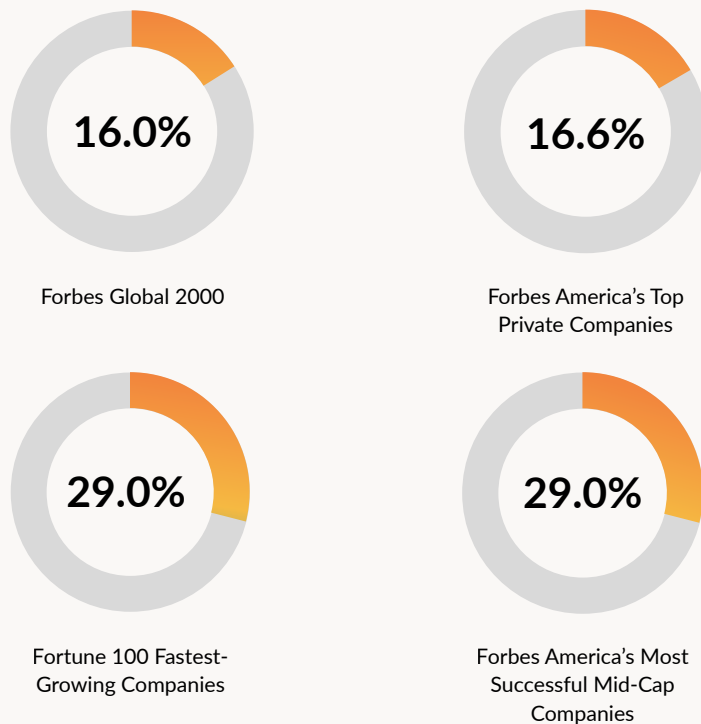
Of the 164 S&P 500 companies with a CRO in 2026, 67 of them did not have one in 2022



N2Growth analysis. CROs and equivalent titles. The 2022 figure counts companies with a CRO today that also had one in 2022.

Fastest-growing companies adopt CROs at nearly twice the rate of global large-caps

Percent of companies with a CRO (2026)



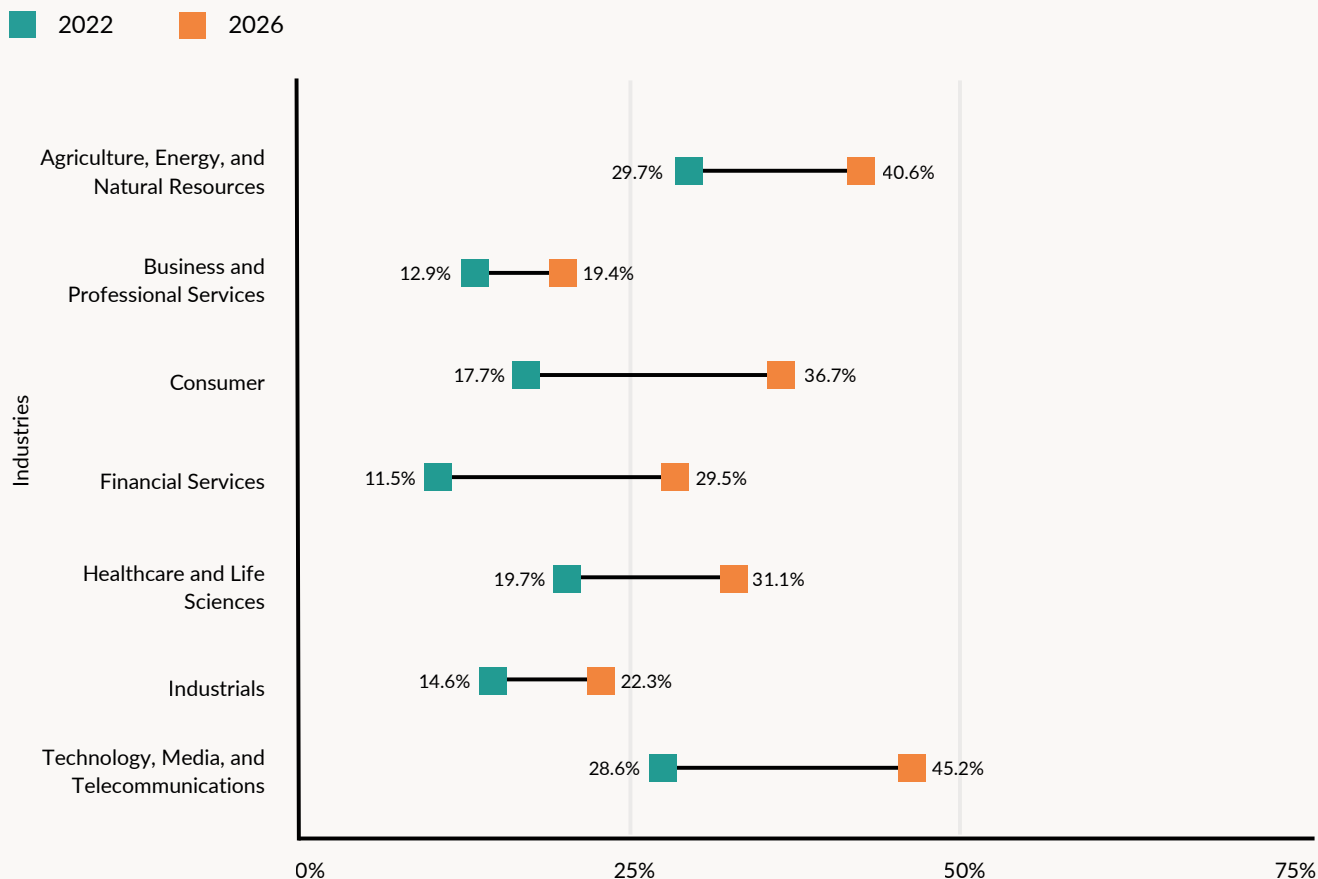
N2Growth analysis. CROs and equivalent titles.

Just under one in three (29.0%) companies on the Fortune 100 Fastest-Growing Companies list have a CRO. Forbes America's Most Successful Mid-Cap Companies show the same rate (29.0%).

Forbes Global 2000 tells a different story, with only 16.0% of companies currently having a CRO, and many of the companies on that list that have a CRO are based in the U.S., further deflating the share of global firms that have a CRO. Because the CRO-led revenue model started in the U.S., the lower Global 2000 rate may reflect a later position on the adoption curve rather than a judgment that the model does not fit. If so, the coordination gains U.S. adopters have been building remain available to companies outside the U.S.

CRO adoption is rising across industries, with tech leading the way

Percent of S&P 500 companies with a CRO, by industry, 2022 vs. 2026



Between 2022 and 2026, the share of S&P 500 companies with a CRO increased across every major industry.

It is no surprise that technology companies have the highest current rate of CRO adoption, 45.2%, given that the modern CRO first appeared in digital and SaaS environments. More surprising, perhaps, is agriculture, energy, and natural resources, which had the highest share of CROs in our 2022 data set, 29.7%, and the second-highest share today, 40.6%. Consumer moved fastest, from 17.7% to 36.7%. These numbers suggest that the benefits of a CRO-coordinated revenue engine can extend well beyond software products and SaaS revenue models into traditional industries that are heavy on tangible assets.

For example, while a utility company's early adoption of a CRO-led revenue model may seem counterintuitive, given the role's association with tech, the turn toward a CRO can be a forward-looking move to evolve a mature, asset-heavy company into an increasingly digital, and soon AI-enabled, service business. In that context, the CRO can navigate complex regulatory environments while using newly available digital data and dashboards to transform the customer experience.

In short, the type of product or service matters less to the value of the CRO model than the underlying technology shaping the company's relationship with customers. And, as we have been emphasizing, that underlying technology is changing again, and reshaping the customer relationship across industries.

Who are organizations hiring to lead?

Which function areas do companies prioritize when hiring CROs?

What are companies prioritizing now? General management experience, which rose from 40.4% of hires in 2022 and prior to 47.7% among appointments hired since 2023. Sales rose over the same period as well (32.7% to 39.3%), but only in the S&P 500. In our cross-index composite, the sales share was flat while general management gained more than eleven points. General management is now the single largest route into the role in both. We expect this trend to continue. As the role matures, leading companies increasingly understand that the CRO is not simply the senior-most sales (or marketing or customer success) role. It is an enterprise leadership position that requires cross-functional management and the ability to engage the board and CEO.

The smaller functional routes remain viable paths for some, but are still relatively rare. Marketing fell from 5.8% to 4.7% and customer success from 7.7% to 0.9%.

Our cross-index composite, which combines the S&P 500 with four other indices (altogether covering 2,439 distinct companies), has similar findings.¹² General management rose from 34.9% of the earlier cohort to 46.3% of those hired since 2023. Nearly half of all newly hired CROs in the composite now come from general management positions, matching what we found in S&P 500 companies.

“Companies once promoted their highest-performing sales VP into the CRO role and expected magic. In 2026 and beyond, that’s a high-risk gamble. Modern revenue leaders need general management range. They must understand data architectures, customer lifecycle economics, and change management just as deeply as they understand closing deals.”



Frank Congiu

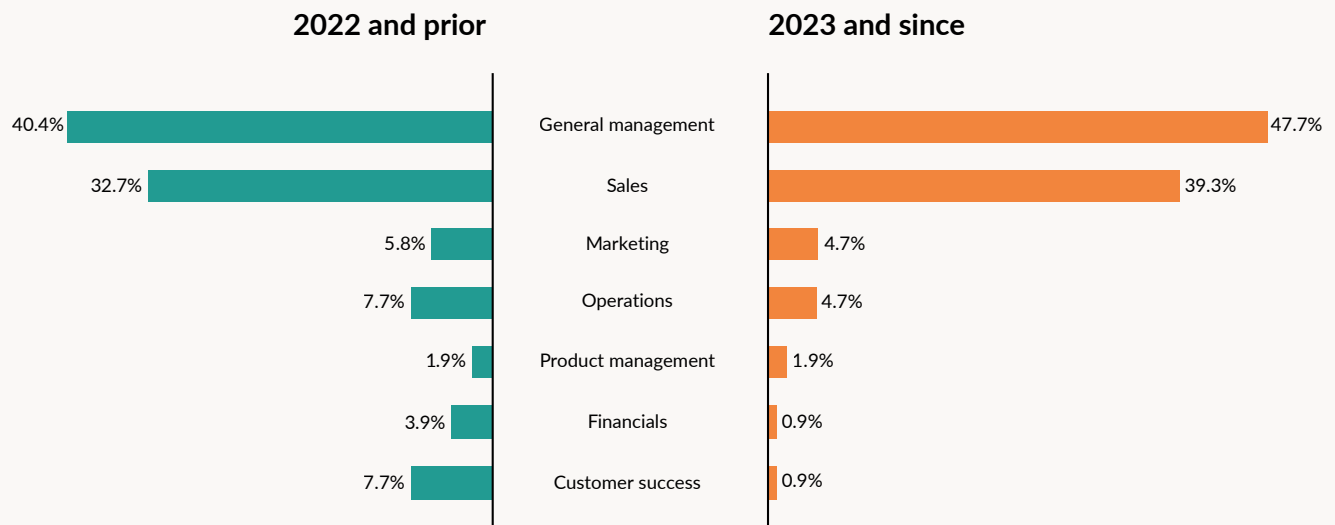
EVP, Human Capital Strategy and Executive Partnerships, Randstad Enterprise

¹² The cross-index composite combines the S&P 500, the Forbes Global 2000, the Fortune 100 Fastest-Growing Companies, Forbes America's Top Private Companies, and Forbes America's Most Successful Mid-Cap Companies. The five lists contain 2,899 entries covering 2,439 distinct companies. Companies appearing on more than one list are counted once. See Methodology for the base used in each measure.

General management is the leading route into the CRO role

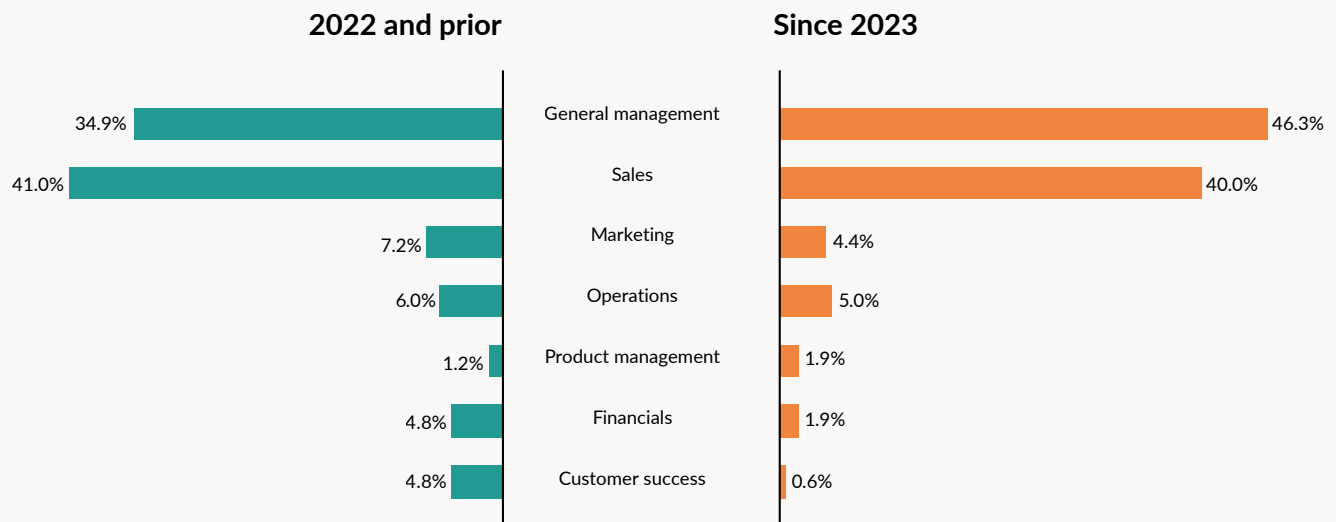
S&P 500

Percent of CRO hires by previous function area, 2022 and prior vs. 2023 and since



Cross-index composite

Percent of CRO hires by previous function area, 2022 and prior vs. 2023 and since



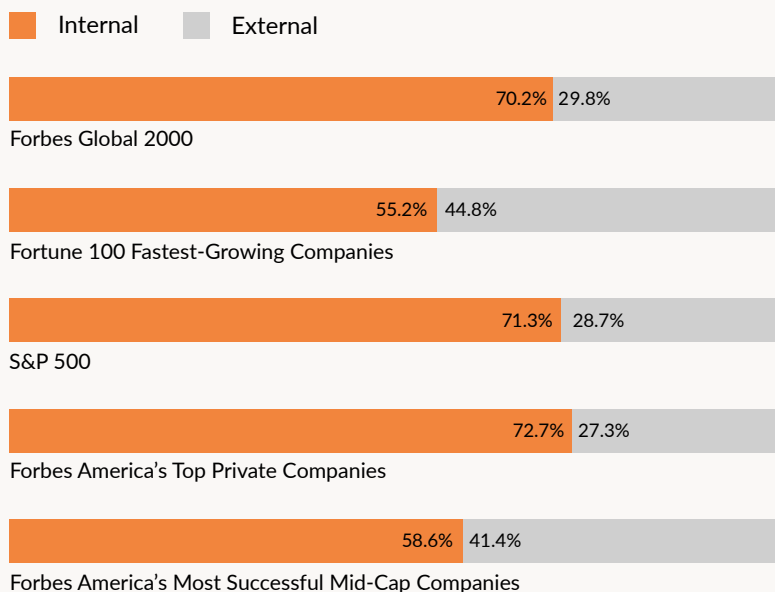
N2Growth analysis. CROs and equivalent titles, comparing CROs appointed in 2022 and prior with those hired since 2023. Bases are the 159 S&P 500 CROs and 243 cross-index composite CROs for whom both previous function area and time in role are recorded. The earlier cohort excludes companies that have since dropped the role. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

How often are CROs hired from within?

Across indices, companies favor internal appointments for the CRO role, though the rate varies. Internal hires account for roughly seven in ten CROs in the S&P 500, the Forbes Global 2000, and Forbes America's Top Private Companies. Among the fastest-growing companies and mid-cap companies, the split is closer to even, at 55.2% and 58.6%.

Internal appointees, who already understand a company's culture and position, bring several advantages. But the fact that around seven in ten CRO appointments are internal may also suggest that the market for CRO talent is still relatively immature. By comparison, CHROs in the S&P 500 are internally appointed 56.9% of the time.¹³ If the fastest-growing companies are looking outside nearly half the time, companies should be careful not to default too quickly to the familiar.¹⁴ Having the right person who can lead across functions pays in the long run. That person may not be whoever currently leads the sales function or any other single function.

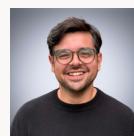
Most companies prefer internal CRO hires, but the fastest-growing companies are nearly evenly split between internal and external appointments



Among CROs in the S&P 500 appointed in 2022 and prior, 79.3% were internal hires. That figure is down to 67.9% for CROs hired since 2023, which suggests that, as the role matures, the mix may move further toward a more balanced internal-external split, even if internal candidates

"The fastest-growing enterprises go outside for their CRO nearly half the time, much more often than S&P 500 companies. I don't read that as outsiders causing growth. I read it as strong boards and CEOs testing their internal bench against the full market instead of defaulting to whoever runs sales today."

Tony Morales
Chairman, N2Growth



¹³ Tony Morales, et al., "The leading-edge CHRO: The future of the people function is here," N2Growth, December 2025, 19–27.

¹⁴ Although it should be noted that the Fortune 100 Fastest-Growing Companies and Forbes America's Most Successful Mid-Cap Companies lists include only 100 companies each and consequently each have low n-counts (29 each) for CROs in-role. The significance of their internal/external appointment splits should therefore be read with caution.

remain somewhat favored.

As the CRO role matures, companies are becoming more open to external hires, though internal candidates still dominate

Percent of CROs appointed internally and externally in 2022 and prior vs. 2023 and since

Internal External

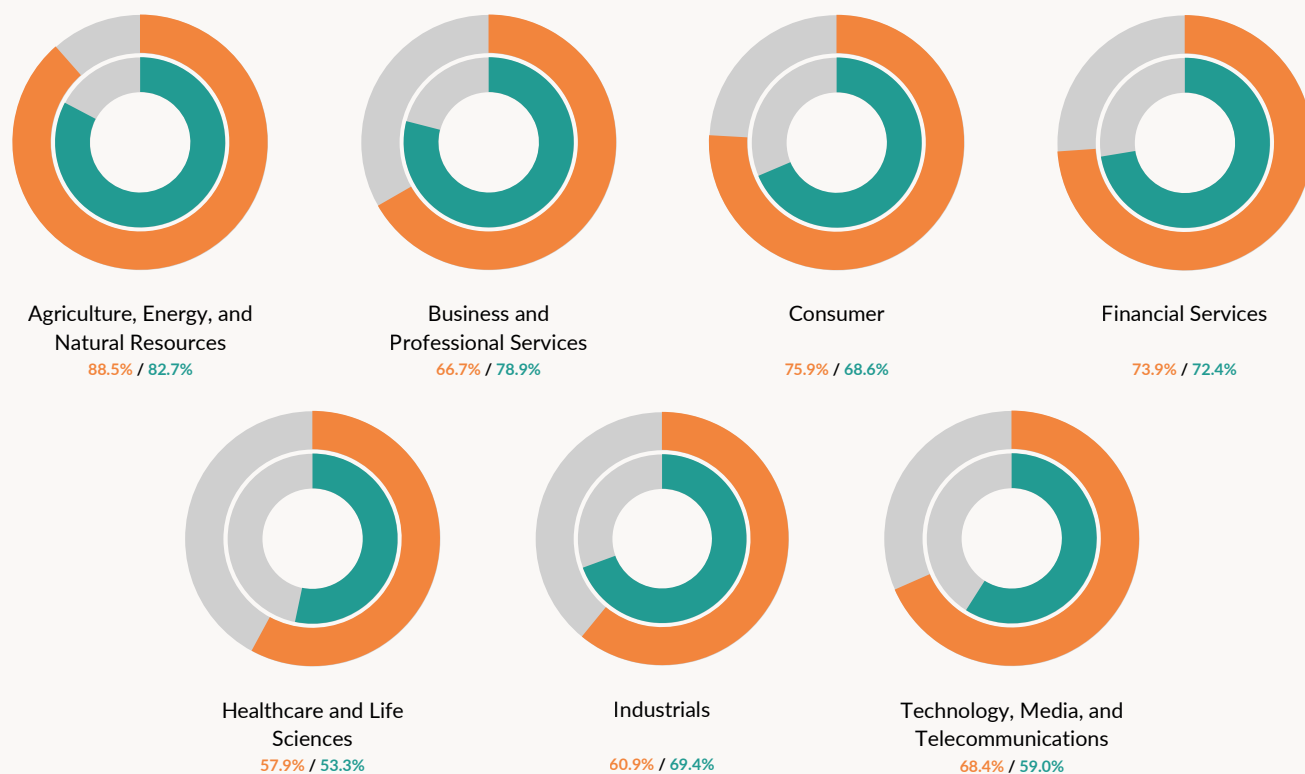


N2Growth analysis. CROs and equivalent titles. The earlier cohort excludes companies that have since dropped the role. Because externally appointed CROs have shorter median tenure than internal ones, the 2022-and-prior cohort under-represents external hires, and the shift toward external appointment is likely somewhat overstated. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Across industries, companies still prefer internal CRO hires

Percent of internal hire type by industry

S&P 500 Cross-index composite



N2Growth analysis. CROs and equivalent titles. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Do companies show a preference for CRO candidates who come from the same industry?

Companies show a strong preference for external CRO candidates with industry experience. Of externally appointed CROs in the S&P 500, 72.3% came from the same industry. In our cross-index composite, 75.0% did.

Companies strongly favor external CRO candidates from the same industry¹⁵

Percent of externally appointed CROs who come from the same or a different industry

Same industry Different industry

S&P 500



Cross-index composite



N2Growth analysis. CROs and equivalent titles. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

How long do CROs stay in the role, and how long were they in their prior roles?

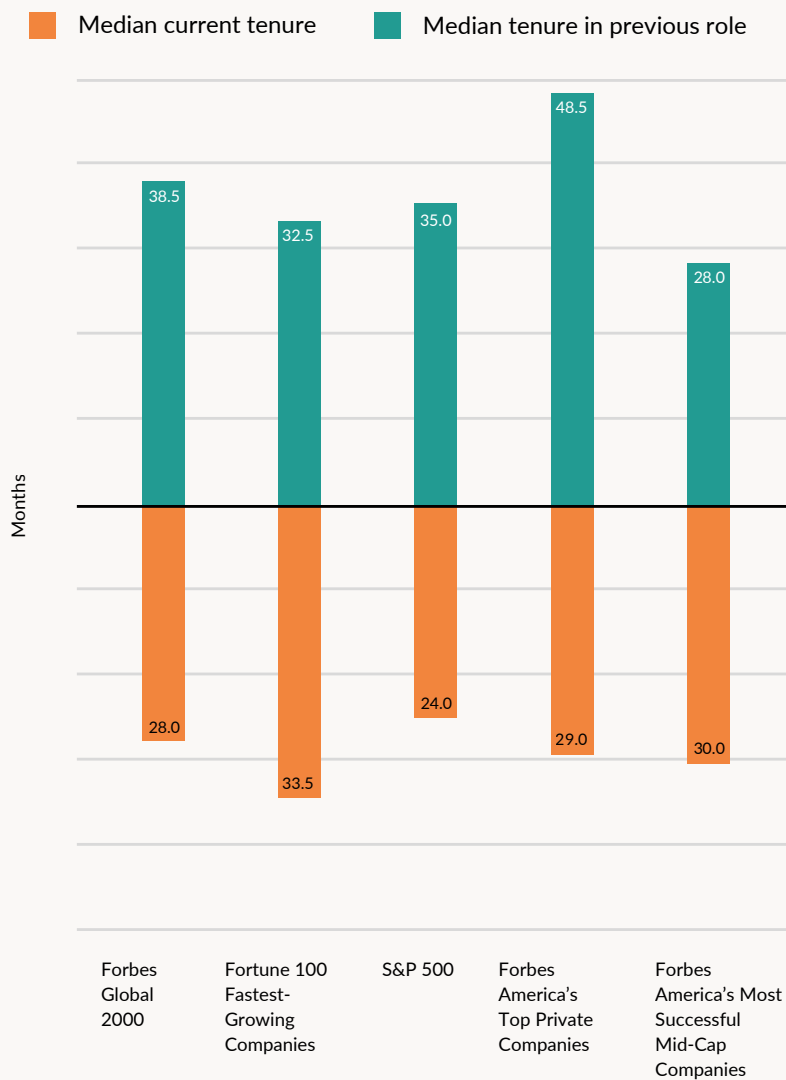
Among our comparison set, the Fortune 100 Fastest-Growing Companies have the longest median current tenure, 33.5 months, suggesting an interesting potential connection between growth and stability in the CRO seat. It takes time to build a strong working relationship with the CEO, as well as with the business unit and functional leaders a CRO must coordinate, manage, and develop.

Median tenure in the immediately preceding role runs longer than current tenure in three of the five indices, most sharply in the S&P 500 (35.0 months prior against 24.0 now) and Forbes America's Top Private Companies (48.5 against 29.0). Caution in reading too much into these figures is warranted, however, since current tenure counts time served so far, not a finished term, and will rise as sitting CROs stay on. This finding of relatively short tenures (shorter than time in previous role), therefore, is at least somewhat the result of the role being a newer role in many organizations.

¹⁵ This contrasts with CHROs, for example, where external appointments are more often cross-industry appointments than same-industry appointments; see Tony Morales, et al., "The leading-edge CHRO: The future of the people function is here," N2Growth, December 2025, 27–29.

Fastest-growing companies tend to have CROs with longer median tenure than S&P 500 and Global 2000 firms

A comparison of median current tenure and tenure in immediately preceding positions across five indices

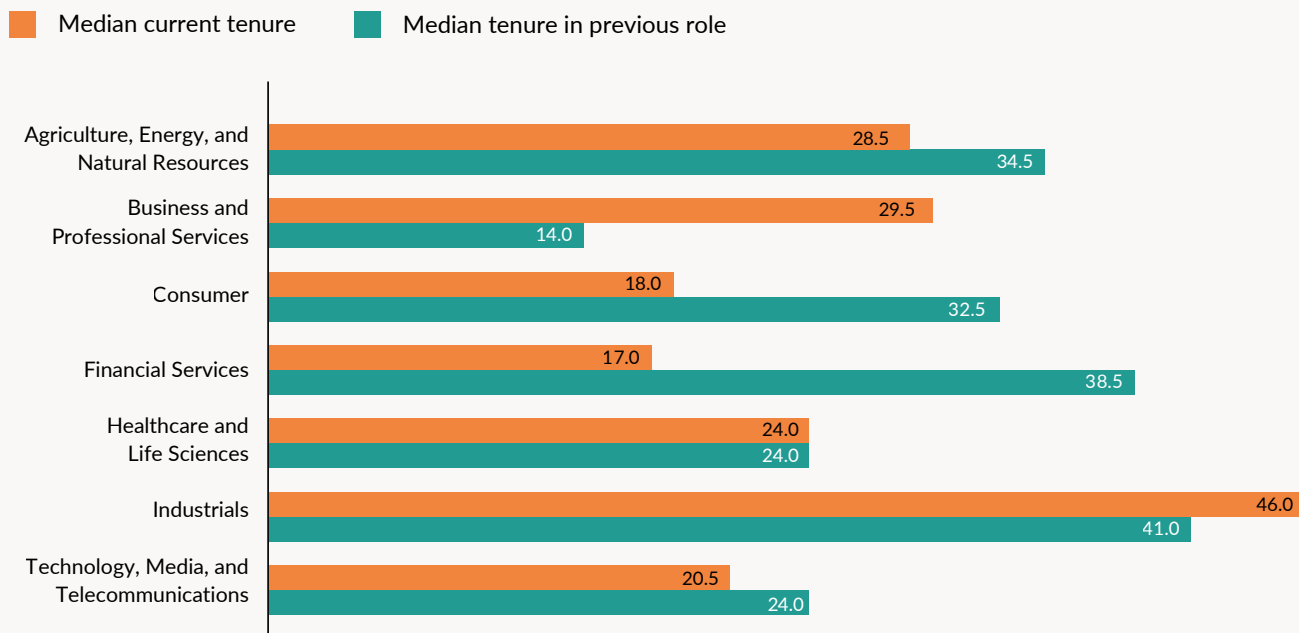


N2Growth analysis. CROs and equivalent titles. Forbes Global 2000 figures are based on a subset of that list. See Methodology. Index medians other than the S&P 500 rest on 28 to 37 CROs and should be read as indicative. Median figures rounded to the nearest half month.

Tenure also varies sharply by industry. Median current tenure runs from 17.0 months in financial services and 18.0 in consumer to 46.0 in industrials. This data may partially reflect when each industry adopted the role. The sectors with the shortest current tenure are among those that added CROs relatively late, so their leaders have simply had less time in the job. When short tenure instead indicates a high rate of turnover, the board and the CEO should review potential causes for the turnover.

Median CRO tenure varies nearly threefold across industries

Median current tenure and tenure in immediately preceding positions across industries, S&P 500



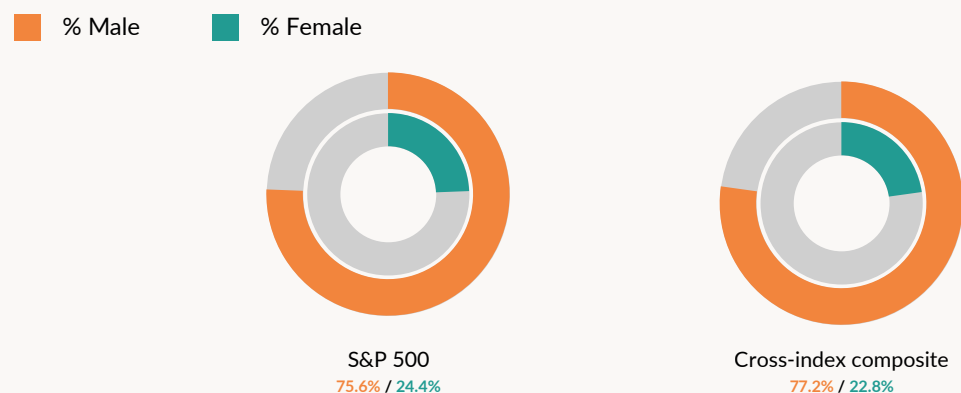
N2Growth analysis. CROs and equivalent titles. Read low-count figures with caution: business and professional services (n = 6; n = 5 previous role), healthcare and life sciences (n = 13 previous role), industrials (n = 19 previous role).

What is the demographic breakdown of current CROs?

1. What is the gender breakdown of CRO appointments?

A gender gap persists: 75.6% of S&P 500 CROs are male, as are 77.2% of CROs in our cross-index composite. The data suggest that the CRO pipeline remains narrower than it should be, and that companies may still be overlooking qualified talent.

The CRO role remains disproportionately male across indices



N2Growth analysis. CROs and equivalent titles. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

2. What is the median age at CRO appointment?

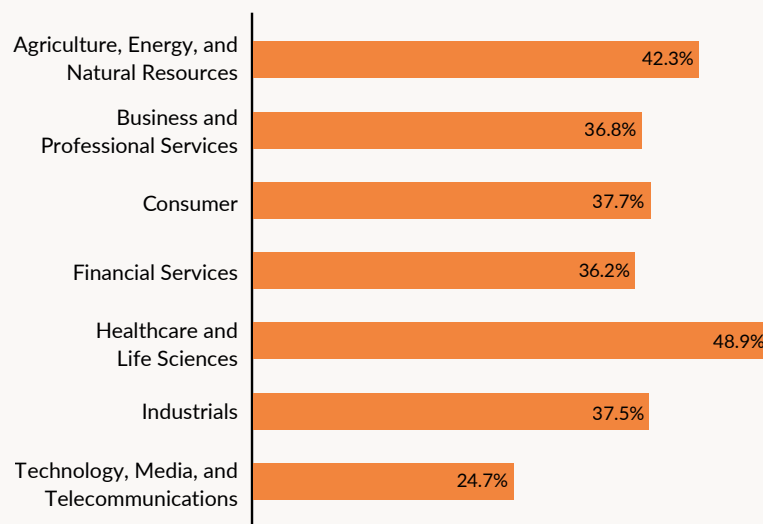
In the S&P 500, the median age at appointment is 51, and 50.5 in the cross-index composite. Companies across all five indices are reaching for people at roughly the same career stage.

3. How many CROs have an MBA?

Just over a third of CROs in our cross-index composite hold an MBA. The MBA can be helpful, but it is not necessary. Operating range and cross-functional judgment are the more important prerequisites.

Across industries, 36.8% of CROs hold an MBA

Percent of CROs with an MBA (cross-index composite), by industry



N2Growth analysis. CROs and equivalent titles. Percentages describe the CROs for whom educational attainment was recorded, 381 of 418 (91%). Recording rates range from 77% to 100% by industry, so cross-industry comparisons should be read as indicative.

What are the four types of CRO?

All effective CROs exercise enterprise leadership. But the CRO position varies depending on business moment, growth stage, scale, and stakeholder context.

To understand how business moment and stage map onto hiring, N2Growth conducted a cluster analysis of 457 CRO job descriptions from around the world. Four archetypes emerged: the commercial operator, the growth integrator, the value architect, and the industry specialist.

Each CRO archetype reflects a pattern in what organizations are looking for when they hire a revenue leader, and each demands a meaningfully different profile. Boards and CEOs, PE sponsors, or founders who treat the CRO search as a generic executive hire, or who rely on title as a proxy for remit, will often find themselves with the wrong leader for their moment.

Note that titles do not map neatly onto archetypes. CRO, CGO, CCO, CBDO, and CSO titles appear across cluster types.

Archetype	Distinguishing features	Typical contexts and use-cases
Commercial operator	Heavy emphasis on sales, marketing, partnerships, and enterprise-scale business development; focuses on channels and large customer segments; often reports to the CEO or board	Large, mature organizations seeking to scale revenue through partnerships, channel management, and enterprise business development
Growth integrator	Integrates marketing, sales, product, and operations; owns the customer journey end-to-end; builds scalable revenue engines with cross-functional alignment	High-growth or scaling companies needing a unified leader to align demand generation, product-market fit, and sales execution
Value architect	Strong product and strategy focus; minimal emphasis on business development; often PE-/founder-driven	Founder-controlled or private-equity-backed firms preparing for exits or major funding events; product-led growth and strategic repositioning
Industry specialist	Narrow remit; moderate business development; low marketing emphasis; often sector-specific	Regulated or specialized sectors (e.g., public sector, healthcare); roles focused on specific operational or customer-experience improvements

“Most CRO searches reflect one of four situations. Boards and CEOs ask their CRO to extend the firm’s commercial reach, to make the revenue functions work as one system integrated into the full enterprise, to reshape where the firm plays and how it wins ahead of a value event, or to bring deep industry know-how into a specialized context. Board and CEO alignment on that ask defines the remit, the organization design, and the scorecard for a successful hire.”

Tony Morales
Chairman, N2Growth



The commercial operator

28.0%

This CRO is the most outward-facing of the four types. The role centers on enterprise-scale business development: channel management, partner ecosystems, large strategic deals, and the alignment of sales and marketing around major customer segments. These leaders often report directly to the CEO or board and are most common in large, mature organizations seeking to scale revenue through relationships and commercial reach.

What companies are looking for? Enterprise sales and marketing leadership, a proven track record building and managing channels and partnerships, the commercial judgment to negotiate complex deals, and the executive presence to report performance and forecasts to the CEO and board. The emphasis is on external leverage, landing and expanding at scale, more than on end-to-end integration of the revenue engine.

What distinguishes this type? Compared with the growth integrator, this CRO is less focused on unifying the internal system and more focused on expanding its commercial reach. The work is primarily oriented outward, toward channels, partners, and large-account development, instead of inward, toward aligning marketing, product, and customer success into a single operating model.

The growth integrator

31.5%

This is the CRO who builds and owns the revenue engine as a unified system. The role integrates marketing, sales, product, and operations; owns the customer journey end-to-end; and is responsible for demand generation, shared KPIs across functions, and scalable go-to-market execution. These leaders are most common in high-growth or scaling companies that need a single revenue architect, not just a senior commercial operator.

What companies are looking for? Fluency across both marketing and sales, strong analytical capability, familiarity with SaaS revenue metrics, experience scaling high-growth businesses, and the ability to align go-to-market strategy, product roadmap, and customer journey into a coherent system. The right candidate has worn multiple functional hats and understands how they interact.

What distinguishes this type? This hire goes deeper than the commercial operator in unifying the revenue engine itself. Where the commercial operator builds outward, the growth integrator builds inward, tightening the connections between functions, eliminating the handoff failures that cost growth, and creating the kind of operating coherence that compounds over time.

The value architect

23.8%

This CRO is a strategic architect who works in close proximity to the company's owners or investors. The role centers on product-led growth, market positioning, and preparing the organization for a major value-creation event: an exit, a funding round, or a strategic pivot. Day-to-day sales and marketing execution is not the primary focus; shaping the company's trajectory is.

What companies are looking for? Deep product management and corporate strategy experience, financial modeling capability, investor relations fluency, and a sophisticated understanding of how product and market positioning create enterprise value. These roles are most common in founder-controlled or private-equity-backed firms where growth is inseparable from strategic repositioning.

What distinguishes this type? Where the growth integrator focuses on running the revenue system, this CRO's primary work is shaping the conditions under which it creates value. The stakeholder set is different, founders and investors instead of boards and functional leaders, and so is the success metric.

The industry specialist

16.6%

The industry specialist CRO often has narrower, more sector-specific remits. These roles tend to appear in regulated or specialized industries, including healthcare, public sector, and certain financial services, where the CRO is expected to drive incremental commercial improvement within defined operational and compliance parameters.

What companies are looking for? Sector-specific expertise, operational and process-improvement skills, compliance and risk management knowledge, and the ability to oversee targeted customer-experience programs. Broad go-to-market ownership, investor alignment, and end-to-end revenue integration are not typically the point. This is a narrower mandate, and boards and CEOs should be clear-eyed about that when hiring for it.

What distinguishes this type? This role is narrower and more sector-specific than the others. It typically emphasizes operational improvement, compliance, and targeted customer or commercial outcomes, instead of broad revenue ownership, investor alignment, or end-to-end go-to-market integration.

These archetypes are not prescriptive. Most CRO mandates don't fit any one archetype precisely, and the right archetype for a given company will evolve as the business changes. What the framework does provide is a useful corrective to the assumption that CRO hiring is generic. Before asking who the best CRO candidate is, ask what kind of CRO the company needs, and why, right now.

What is the future of growth?

Having a singular C-suite officer in charge of strategically aligning the revenue engine isn't a trend. It's the future. But that future is already changing fast. AI is rewiring the business, just as the internet and cloud have for more than twenty-five years.

For organizations that have already moved to a CRO-style structure, or are contemplating such a move, it's already time to move past the cloud-era conception of the CRO of 2023 and prior and turn to the CRO of 2026 and beyond who will guide and coordinate revenue functions through the shift to AI.

But shifting to the AI-defined future is easier said than done. What do boards, CEOs, and CROs need to understand about the future of growth leadership to move forward?

Three theses on the future of growth

- 1. No one knows the future.**
Don't rely on one event or metaphor to north star your organization to what's next.

While it might seem cheap to note that the future is unknown, the human mind constantly returns to what it has seen before when it faces new situations. It makes the unknown into the known through metaphor and analogy. This works. Usually. That's why boards and CEOs hire based on a candidate's previous experience and success. "Have they done this before? Have they produced growth? Have they led cross-functional teams at a global firm?"

"AI won't replace the revenue leader, but it will expose leaders who only want to run the revenue engine that's already in place. The next generation of CROs will orchestrate human talent alongside intelligent systems, rebuilding go-to-market workflows so teams spend less time synthesizing data and more time deepening customer trust."

Frank Congiu
EVP, Human Capital Strategy
and Executive Partnerships,
Randstad Enterprise



But this habit of mind must be resisted when it comes to transitioning growth leadership to the AI future. Overreliance on any single metaphor or analogy skews one's mental map. It's akin to relying upon a 16th-century map to plan a trip. Some things might be right, but too much will be wrong.

AI may be like the calculator: powerful but discrete in its effects. Conversely, it may prove to be more like the splitting of the atom, a historically unprecedented technology, whose potential payoff appeared limitless to its earliest observers in ways that are strikingly similar to the current discourse around AI.¹⁶ Or, going further back in time, it may parallel the domestication of the horse, which combined powers of the human and the non-human and transformed civilization.

Instead of navigating the unknown without metaphor or analogy (which might be impossible, given the way the human mind works), leaders should become adept at juggling several at once, deploying and dispensing with them as needed to prepare for many possible futures.

For boards and CEOs: do not hire your next CRO as though the future were already legible. Hire for range of judgment, comfort with ambiguity, and the ability to scenario-plan without becoming captive to a single forecast.

2. The future will not be a continuation of the present. Don't retrofit tomorrow's technologies into yesterday's processes.

If one mistake leaders make when preparing for the future is to rely too strongly upon a single metaphor (see above), the second fundamental mistake leaders make is tacitly assuming that the future will be a continuation of the present. It's the error Blockbuster made, for example, when it adapted to the future by moving the location of physical DVDs from dedicated storefronts to multisite vending machines. Physical DVDs, the vision went, would have a different point of sale, but the customer journey would remain essentially the same: go to a store, get the DVD. From this point of view, new technology would enable more convenience for the customer (a trip to the closest grocery or drugstore instead of to wherever the nearest Blockbuster was) and lower costs for the firm (since it wouldn't have to rent storefronts). It was a sensible vision, but one that left Blockbuster chasing its present, not the future. It's a mistake successful companies make over and over again: using new technology to optimize existing models while missing how the model itself is changing.

It is cognitively straightforward to foresee a near future where AI will speed current processes, automate workflows, and power a faster, cheaper, less labor-intensive version of current outputs. "We'll do what we do now, only faster, with fewer people." But certain types of changes transform the present, not just accelerate it. A college directory becomes something fundamentally different once it's put online, whether the earliest leaders and adopters of Facebook realized that or not. We anticipate AI will transform the very structure of the revenue engine, not simply accelerate current processes.

For boards, CEOs, and CROs: do not presume that the impact of AI will simply accelerate the current revenue engine. Instead, ask which parts of the revenue system will still exist in their current form at all. Which work will disappear, which new types of decisions will need to be made, which roles will need to be redesigned, and which forms of marketing, sales, product, and customer success will no longer make sense?

¹⁶ For example, "With [atomic] energy man [sic] could build an industrial civilization with a standard of living that would satisfy all his material wants to an extent never dreamed of . . . [with applications] to industry, agriculture, biology and medicine." William L. Laurence, "The Great Promise of the Atomic Age: The Peacetime Atom . . . Offers All Mankind the Hope of Harmony, Plenty and a Longer Life to Enjoy Them," *New York Times*, October 27, 1957.

3. Your customer will change as much as you will. Follow their lead.

The buyer journey will transform just as much as marketing, sales, product, and customer success will. Leaders must therefore pay as much attention to how the transformation of the revenue engine will reshape buying and the buyer as they do to the transformation itself.

In other words, when the revenue engine changes and nearly every seller has instant, already-interpreted, full-view access to buyers, leaders have to be constantly asking themselves what will happen to customer behavior and expectations. What will customers expect from customer service? Will B2B proposals even exist if clients feed what had been highly tailored sales pitches into an AI procurement specialist? Will high-end professional services be reduced to procurement-driven commodities? If buyers, whether institutional or individual, can easily design their own software systems and have agents acting on their behalf, how will that force marketing, sales, product, and customer success to adapt?

No one knows (see thesis 1), but the leader organizations need is the one paying closest attention to how the buyer and buying are changing. This applies across industries and buyer types (B2B, B2C, B2G). It means more than switching from SEO (search engine optimization) to GEO (generative engine optimization); it may presage a shift to understanding bot “psychology” and which sales techniques work best on AI agents.¹⁷

The CRO of 2026 and beyond will need stronger buyer intelligence than their predecessors, not just better internal tooling. They will need to instrument how customers research, compare, procure, and renew in an AI-mediated environment, then redesign go-to-market around those shifts before competitors do.

¹⁷ Stefano Puntoni, “AI Is Upending Marketing on Two Fronts,” Harvard Business Review, February 23, 2026; Jafar Sabbah and Oguz A. Acar, “Research: Traditional Marketing Doesn’t Work on AI Shopping Agents,” Harvard Business Review, May 12, 2026; Kartik Hosanagar, “How Do You Market to an AI customer?” Harvard Business Review, June 11, 2026.

What's next?

As AI comes to the revenue engine, companies will need different types of capabilities and experiences in the CROs they hire. If the CRO of 2023 needed to thrive amidst CRM systems and cloud-era data, the CRO of 2026 and beyond will need to lead through an AI-defined revenue environment whose contours are still emerging. How should boards and CEOs, current CROs, and aspiring CROs prepare for and respond to this new environment?

For boards and CEOs

1. Prioritize enterprise range over functional pedigree.

General management is now the single largest route into the CRO role, accounting for nearly half of recent appointments. This is because the strongest candidates are those who are able to translate a growth vision into coordinated execution across functions, align leaders outside their direct control, and engage the board as a true enterprise partner. With the right training and experience, sales leaders thrive in the role, but boards and CEOs need to know that an effective CRO requires general business skills and that the best candidate is not simply the highest grossing sales leader available.

2. Keep the CRO close to the board and CEO.

Coordinated execution is itself a strategic advantage, and the CRO cannot generate it from organizational distance. Trust, proximity, and regular exposure to the CEO and board are prerequisites. The CRO should help shape priorities, not merely implement them.

3. Hire for what you need in 2026 and beyond.

No one has already led the fully formed AI-era revenue function, because it does not yet exist. Put less weight on finding candidates who would have been perfect in the last era and prioritize those with demonstrated ability to lead through ambiguity, redesign systems, and stay close to shifts in buyer behavior. Simultaneously, understand the type of CRO your business needs and find candidates who match that mandate. The four archetypes identified in this report, the commercial operator, the growth integrator, the value architect, and the industry specialist, reflect meaningfully different business needs.

For current CROs

1. Redesign the engine through AI.

The cloud-era CRO was often charged with coordinating functions that had previously been walled off from one another. That remains a core part of the role, but AI is now reshaping those functions at the same time it is changing the buyer and the buying journey. Coordinating the existing system is no longer enough, because the system itself is being transformed. The task before CROs now is increasingly to redesign the revenue engine and reconsider everything from the separation between marketing and product development to the taste preference of bot buyers.

2. Treat go-to-market as a system.

The strongest revenue leaders now think less like heads of a function and more like engineers of a system. Understand how tooling, data flows, feedback loops, organizational design, and buyer behavior interact. Build a revenue system that is coherent, observable, and improvable.

3. Stay closest to the buyer.

AI will change marketing, sales, product, and customer success. It will transform buying just as much. The CRO who matters most over the next several years will be the one paying closest attention to how customers research, compare, procure, and renew, and how they increasingly delegate those activities to digital agents. Better tooling will matter. Better buyer intelligence will matter more.

For aspiring CROs

1. Build cross-functional and general management range deliberately.

Nearly half of newly hired CROs now come from general management backgrounds. The CRO is an enterprise leadership position. Seek experiences that deepen fluency across marketing, sales, product, customer success, and the broader business, including roles that stretch beyond a traditional commercial lane.

2. Seek experiences that build change leadership, not just linear advancement.

No one has already held or led the fully developed future of the role. Repeated experience leading through ambiguity, discontinuity, and structural change matters more than a tidy career path. Acquisitions, growth-stage shifts, major technology adoption, business model change, and cross-functional integration are all better preparation than a perfectly sequenced resume.

3. Build the role before you hold it.

Roughly seven in ten CROs are promoted from inside the company, so the position is usually shaped by the person who grows into it rather than handed over intact. Start building trust and coordinating across functions, experiment with how information and communication can be integrated through AI, and take on opportunities to lead through change. Keeping in mind that the future of growth will not simply be a continuation of the present, prepare the revenue engine you're building for 2026 and beyond.

Methodology

N2Growth examined more than 28,000 individual data points across five indices: the S&P 500 (500 companies, 164 with a CRO or equivalent), the Forbes Global 2000 (2,000 / 319), Fortune 100 Fastest-Growing Companies (100 / 29), Forbes America's Top Private Companies (199 / 33), and Forbes America's Most Successful Mid-Cap Companies (100 / 29). The study ran from December 2025 to September 2026.

Data were drawn from 10-Ks and DEF 14As, company and executive directories, corporate websites, public LinkedIn profiles, and a proprietary database. Background interviews with revenue leaders informed the analysis but are not cited. Data sourced through APIs or automated collection were verified by human researchers. Industry figures use the N2Growth sector taxonomy, applied to each company's primary business.

Some measures are reported for a single index, most often the S&P 500; others combine all five into a cross-index composite of 2,439 distinct companies, 418 of which have a CRO or equivalent. For the Global 2000, tenure, previous function area, and previous-employer figures come from a 200-company subset where those fields were confirmed.

The 2022 comparison holds index membership constant from 2026, and measures how many of the S&P 500's current constituents had a CRO or equivalent in 2022 rather than the share of the 2022 index. This isolates adoption from changes in index composition. Companies that had the role in 2022 but not today are not captured, so 2022 shares are conservative. Where data are split by appointment date, we compare CROs appointed in 2022 or earlier against those appointed in 2023 or later, derived from time in position at collection.

Not every attribute was recorded for every CRO. Percentages are calculated on the CROs for whom the attribute is known, so denominators vary by measure, and unknown values are excluded rather than counted as negative. In the S&P 500: gender, hiring source and industry (n = 164), previous function area (n = 161), current tenure (n = 162), previous-role tenure (n = 133), age at appointment (n = 103). In the cross-index composite: industry (n = 418), gender (n = 417), hiring source (n = 415), educational attainment (n = 381), current tenure (n = 247), age at appointment (n = 254), previous function area (n = 245).

The four CRO archetypes derive from a separate analysis. N2Growth applied cluster analysis to 457 CRO and equivalent job descriptions from companies worldwide, grouping them by the responsibilities, functional scope, and reporting relationships each described. The percentages reported describe the share of job descriptions in each cluster, not the share of sitting CROs. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

About



N2Growth is a global executive search and leadership advisory firm. Since our founding in 2006, we have served the boards and senior leadership teams of public companies, private equity and venture-backed firms, family enterprises, universities, foundations, and sovereign governments. With 25 offices across 16 countries, our people and capabilities enable organizations to attract, develop, and deploy leaders worldwide. Our work covers every industry and function, pairing senior advisory judgment with rigorous, data-driven insights to help clients build the leadership teams that deliver superior and sustainable results.

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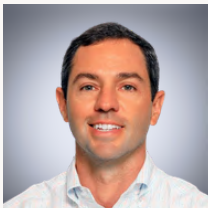
For more information, visit www.randstadenterprise.com.

Authors



Tony Morales
Chairman, N2Growth
t.morales@n2growth.com

Tony Morales is the Chairman of N2Growth, a global executive search and leadership advisory firm. Recognized by the *Financial Times* and *Fortune* for his expertise in governance and succession planning, Tony has advised Hyundai, PwC, Bridgewater Associates, Amway, Blackstone, the University of Tennessee, Atlas Oil, the Royal Hashemite Court, and several emerging startups and prominent family offices. He is also an Executive in Residence at Northwestern Kellogg, where he teaches governance and succession planning to C-suite and board leaders. Previously, Tony was a Lecturer and Observer-Coach at Wharton. Earlier in his career, he co-founded Academica Virtual Education, a nine-figure education services business recognized with the President's "E" Award for Exports. He was also on the staff of the Office of Undergraduate Admissions and the Career Services Office at the University of Pennsylvania. He holds a bachelor's degree in philosophy, politics, and economics, a master's degree in anthropology, and graduate credentials in neuroscience from the University of Pennsylvania. Named to *Forbes* 30 Under 30 and recognized by *Business Insider* as a leading headhunter in technology, Tony joined YPO as its youngest-ever member. His work is driven by a commitment to helping individuals, families, organizations, and economies flourish.



Frank Congiu
EVP, Human Capital Strategy
and Executive Partnerships,
Randstad Enterprise
frank.congiu@randstad.com

Frank Congiu is a trusted advisor to the world's most visionary CHROs, thought leaders, and startup founders. With over 20 years of experience, he operates at the intersection of academic research, leading-edge innovation, and the evolving future of work. He is passionate about bringing people together to solve some of the largest problems facing our workplace and has hosted over 100 CHRO discussion forums around the world. As executive vice president at Randstad Enterprise, he has helped leading global organizations navigate workforce transformations, harness innovation, and drive change. His expertise spans artificial intelligence (AI), the future of work, change management, employee experience, and technology adoption and advancement.

Editorial team

Phillip Webster, Senior Fellow, Leadership Insights | Lead Editor
Alexa Rappaport, Marketing Manager | Project Lead

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